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GOLIATH FALLS AGAIN:
Soviet Failure to Exercise Operational Art in the Afghanistan War

by

Donald M. Boone

Lt Col, Air National Guard

A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of joint Military Operations.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

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ABSTRACT OF

**Goliath Falls Again:
Soviet Failure to Exercise Operational Art in the Afghanistan War**

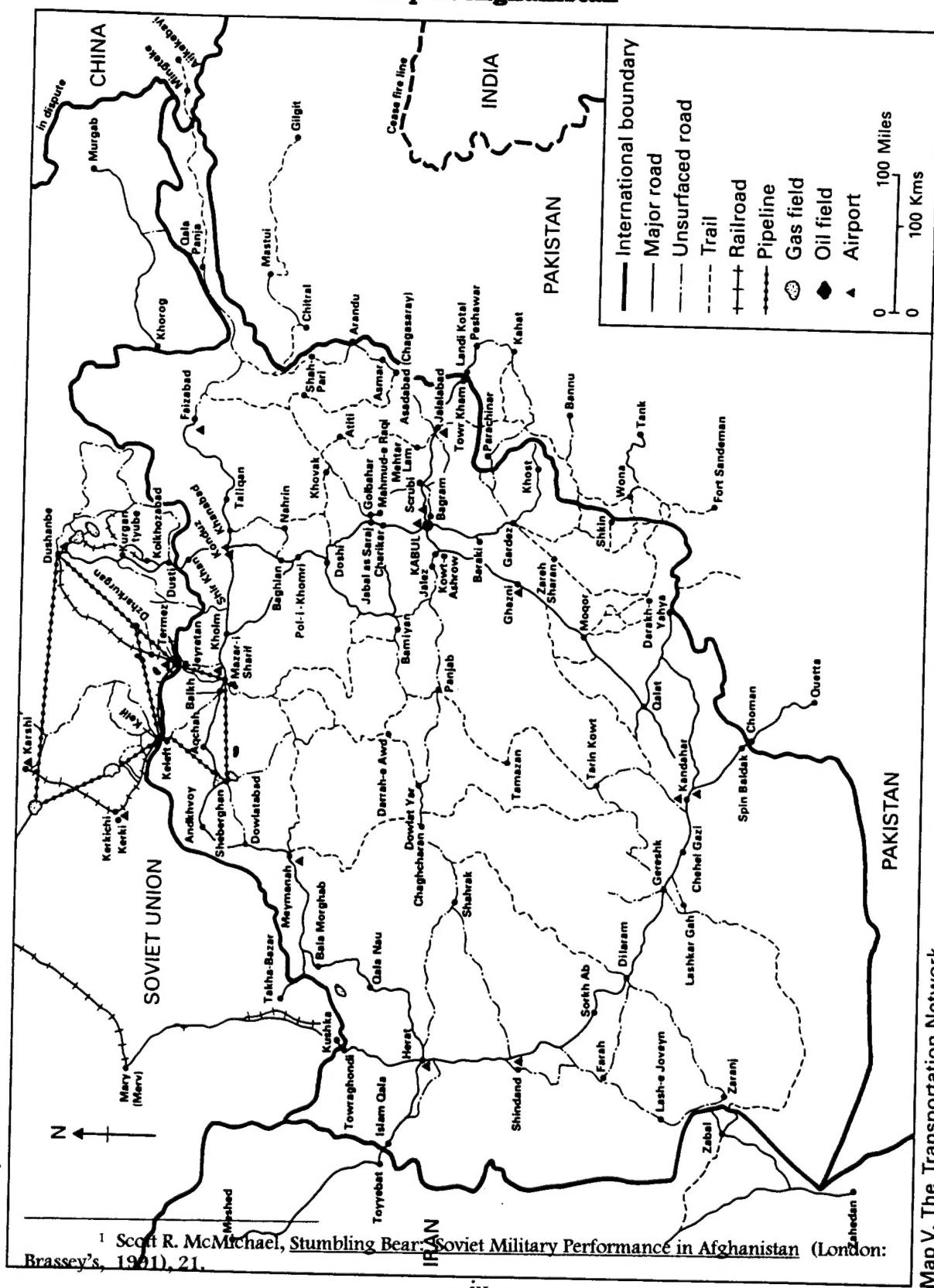
The Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in December 1979, envisioning an opportunity to secure their southern border with a puppet regime and defeat Muslim fundamentalism. They entered the war featuring a European warfare paradigm: a mobile, mechanized force, focusing on mass and concentration, and highly suited to rolling terrain. Their experience in and support of guerrilla-style warfare all but guaranteed a quick and easy defeat of a disorganized, poorly trained & equipped band of rebels. Following a successful invasion, Soviet leadership fell prey to the space of Afghanistan, and in the process, shifted the initiative and the time factor to their adversary, the Mujahedin rebel forces. The Soviet forces never lost a major battle, yet they lost the war. They entered the war with quick, decisive action, but failed to maintain freedom of action. What were the issues that found them unable to grasp and implement the operational factors of space, time and forces in the theater of operations that led to denial of their strategic goals?

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Map of Afghanistan¹

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GOLIATH FALLS AGAIN: Soviet Failure to Exercise Operational Art in the Afghanistan War

“...we neither can nor must measure Afghanistan with a yardstick applicable to industrialized nations.” Lenin, 1921²

Introduction

The Soviet Union launched an invasion of Afghanistan on Christmas Eve, 1979, expecting to restructure the Afghanistan government into a compliant satellite neighbor through quick, decisive military action. And why not? A historical glimpse of Soviet invasions into Czechoslovakia (1968), Hungary (1956) and Iran (1941) gave great credence to the notion that Soviet technology, superior mass, established doctrine, and a world class fighting force would achieve their strategic objectives: surgically amputate the tumor of Afghan discontent; rebuild the Afghan Army; secure their southern border; and defeat Muslim fundamentalism.³ Ten years later, the Soviet-dominated coalition won every major battle against the rebellious Afghanistan forces, the Mujahedin (holy warrior),⁴ yet failed to achieve any of their primary objectives and retreated from Afghanistan.

Thesis

The Soviet Union, one of the world's superpowers in 1979, found themselves unprepared and unable to subjugate the Mujahedin forces in a counterinsurgency war despite enormous advantages in forces and technology. Soviet commanders failed to properly assess and manage the operational factors of space, time and forces against a disorganized and leaderless band of rebels whose primary weapon

² Mark Galeotti, Afghanistan: The Soviet Union's Last War (London: Frank Cass, 1995), 223.

³ Alfred L. Monks, The Soviet Intervention in Afghanistan (American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research: Washington, D.C. 1981), 18-21; Mark Galeotti, Afghanistan: The Soviet Union's Last War (London: Frank Cass, 1995), 10-12.

⁴ Scott R. McMichael, Stumbling Bear: Soviet Military Performance in Afghanistan (London: Brassey's, 1991), xiv.

was their will to win. My thesis will examine Soviet doctrine and operational paradigms that led to a protracted war and availed the Mujahedin to successfully attack the Soviet center of gravity (COG), their political leadership.

Within the context of operational art, the Afghanistan War posed the greatest military challenge to the Soviet Union since World War II. Their rebellious neighbor created an opportunity to conduct a conventional, limited objective (asymmetrical) war in their own backyard (adjoining border), with minimal risk of third party intervention. Soviet commanders envisioned elimination of the resistance forces, intimidation of the Afghan neighborhood, and realignment of the country back to a pro-Soviet neighbor. While they saw themselves as a military Goliath, they failed to see Afghanistan as David.

Prelude to War

Shortly after a Soviet-assisted coup in April 1978, pockets of resistance propagated throughout the Afghan countryside and culminated into attacks against the new President, Nur M Turaki. Throughout 1978 and 1979, Army of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (DRA) desertions increased, the resistance movement continued to expand, and Afghanistan Prime Minister Hafizullah Amin led his own coup to overthrow and execute Turaki. Amin quickly alienated the populace more than Turaki. Fearing loss of control over a leader with ties to the US,⁵ the Soviet Union launched their Christmas Eve invasion to depose Amin and bring the country back into the Communist fold. The Soviets installed Babrak Karmal as the new President, then proceeded to back themselves into a political corner by

⁵ Diego Cordovez and Selig S. Harrison, Out of Afghanistan: The Inside Story of the Soviet Withdrawal (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 43.

supporting a regime even more repressive and unpopular than the group they eliminated.

Soviet Military Doctrine at the Onset of the War

Soviet military doctrine was deeply entrenched in a European warfare paradigm: large-scale, conventional and mechanized, ideally suited to the terrain and climatic conditions of western Europe.⁶ Despite this mindset, Soviet history was replete with guerrilla and counterinsurgency wars. For nearly forty years they equipped, trained, funded, and participated in a number of limited conflicts. So why did they enter Afghanistan with such a rich warfighting heritage, seriously ill-equipped and unprepared to achieve their operational objectives? Why did this military force, preeminent in the development of operational art, blatantly disregard these tenets? Three quick studies can provide some insight.

The Soviet defeat in Afghanistan is consistent with common elements found in Napoleon's Russian Campaign in 1812, the Algerian War (1954-1962) and the Vietnam War (1964-1973). In each case, the intervening superior force possessed vast technological advantages over their adversaries and never lost a major battle. Conversely, they all failed to destroy the enemy's COG, and all withdrew having failed to achieve their strategic goals.

Napoleon's Grand Army won every engagement against the Russian forces, yet could not destroy the Russian Army. When faced with defeat, the Russians

⁶ Lev Dvoretsky and Oleg Sarin, The Afghan Syndrome: The Soviet Union's Vietnam, (Novato, CA: Presidio, 1993) 101-103.

were withdrawn into the space of “Mother Russia” to reconstitute.⁷ The Russian forces maintained the advantage of interior lines and garnered support from the populace. Napoleon anticipated a decisive victory through the advantage of mass and initiative through quick movement against a conventional army. Instead, he became engulfed in a vast space with overextended exterior lines, fighting an army that kept losing but would not capitulate. Napoleon lost the factor of time combined with continual attrition of his forces. Failing to destroy Russia’s COG, the Russian Army, Napoleon finally retreated from Russia.

French forces entered Algeria in 1954 against Algerian resistance groups led by the Front de la Liberation Nationale [FLN], intent on restoring control of the country and eliminating the resistance forces. The fourth ranking world power at the time, France eventually sent one half million troops into Algeria and won every tactical engagement during the eight year conflict.⁸ French forces possessed an enormous technological advantage in weapon systems, including a new offensive weapon: the helicopter.⁹ France lost 12,000 troops during this period compared to 141,000 FLN casualties, yet could not destroy the enemy’s COG, the FLN’s Army. When a battle became too severe, the rebel forces withdrew to the safety of Tunisia, Morocco, and the Aures mountains, which provided excellent defensive and nearly impenetrable positions. Supported by the populace, the rebels forced France into an eight year protracted war. General de Gaulle finally offered Algeria its independence, having failed to achieve his strategic goals.

⁷ Sanjay Singh Yadav, “Failed Great Power and the Soviet Retreat from Afghanistan” Comparative Strategy, Volume 8, 1989, 355.

⁸ Ibid, 356.

⁹ Ibid.

In Vietnam, the United States (US)-led forces won every tactical engagement during the conflict.¹⁰ They employed superior technology and firepower, suffered fewer casualties (total US casualties of 200,000, including 56,000 killed, against North Vietnam casualties of 2,500,000, including 900,000 killed,¹¹ and had advantages of coalition forces and some degree of local popular support. However, it was the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) that successfully managed the use of space and time. They organized and trained north of the 17th Parallel, free from US invasion; staged in the sanctuaries of bordering countries (Laos and Cambodia); and retreated into the forests and mountains of Vietnam for refuge and reconstitution.¹² The NVA guerrilla-style warfare often dictated the place and time to engage; maintained freedom of maneuver; and focused their warfighting effort directly at the enemy's COG, US public will. The US could not destroy North Vietnam's COG, the NVA, and withdrew from Vietnam failing to stabilize and secure the South Vietnam regime against Communist aggression.

With these operational art lessons readily apparent and applicable, the Soviet Union plunged into the space of Afghanistan. They brought an impressive toolbox of military hardware and won every major battle against a disparate band of religious fighters, often prone to fight among themselves. The Soviet enemy would not stand and fight, ignored the classic combat tactics inherent in conventional warfare, and proved to be much the better student of operational art throughout the war.

The Space of Afghanistan

“Freedom of action requires a proper use of space.” Milan Vego, 1996¹³

¹⁰ Eric M. Bergerund, The Dynamics of Defeat, (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1981), 32.

¹¹ Sanjay Singh Yadav, 359.

¹² William J. Duiker, The Communist Road to Power in Vietnam (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1991), 224.

¹³ Milan Vego, “Operational Factors,” U.S. Naval War College Operations Department NWC 4092, September 1996, 2.

Soviet commanders were slow to recognize the factor of space and its extraordinary impact on their warfighting capability. Their success in the initial invasion--capturing the capital city, Kabul, several key facilities and airfields--played out as a replica of the Prague invasion in 1968.¹⁴ In both cases, they achieved surprise through rapid air and land mobility, strong intelligence and C², and concentration of force to achieve all operational objectives. Soviet commanders seized the initiative during the initial stages. Thereafter, the corollary to Czechoslovakia ceased. The space of Afghanistan posed immense considerations from a Soviet war planning perspective, and should have dictated extensive study of the country's geostrategic position¹⁵ and its impact on maneuver and mobility.

Afghanistan presented geographic and climatic factors decidedly contrary to Soviet operational training and employment. Their focus on mechanized forces and encirclement through deep strike, supported by artillery, CAS, and airborne and airmobile assaults,¹⁶ just didn't execute well on a playing field that was anything but level. The mountainous terrain (peaks exceeding 21,000' with half of the country over 6,000' elevation) and desert regions adversely affected nearly all Soviet OPTEMPO: maneuver, accuracy and effects of weapons, fields of fire, observation, physical fitness, logistics, communications, and equipment performance.¹⁷ Moreover, Soviet equipment was not designed for the extreme mountainous and desert climate. Only a limited amount of rugged terrain gear was available to the

¹⁴ Frunze Military Academy, "Combat Actions in Afghanistan, Part II," Journal of Slavic Military Studies, March 1995, 153.

¹⁵ Ibid., 9.

¹⁶ Stephen J. Blank, Operational and Strategic Lessons of the War in Afghanistan, 1979-90, (Carlisle Barracks, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 1991), 29-32.

¹⁷ Scott R. McMichael, "Soviet Tactical Performance and Adaptation in Afghanistan," Journal of Soviet Military Studies, March 1990, 83.

ground troops. Mountain rain and snow soaked and weighted their cotton sleeping bags, while field rations spoiled in the extreme desert and mountain climates.¹⁸

Although the Soviet Union and United States built most of the rural road network and airfields throughout pre-war Afghanistan, roadways were extremely limited and underdeveloped. Part of this condition was due to geographic limitations, and part due to a persistent Afghan philosophy: limited movement enhanced their defensive capability against an invader.¹⁹ Combined with the extreme diversity of climate, elevation, and fierce desert winds during the summer months, Afghanistan's physical environment offered an operationally defensive heaven and an offensive hell.

The good news from the Soviet perspective was the simplicity of its offensive operations. The initial success in 1979 only reinforced Soviet confidence in high OPTEMPO utilizing mass and concentration in the space of western Europe. They considered this counterinsurgency war more of an anomaly than a fundamental assessment and implementation of operational art. A branch of their operational strategy consisted of a high tempo concentration of mass against fortified defenses, combined with operational fires to annihilate rebel positions and supply routes.²⁰

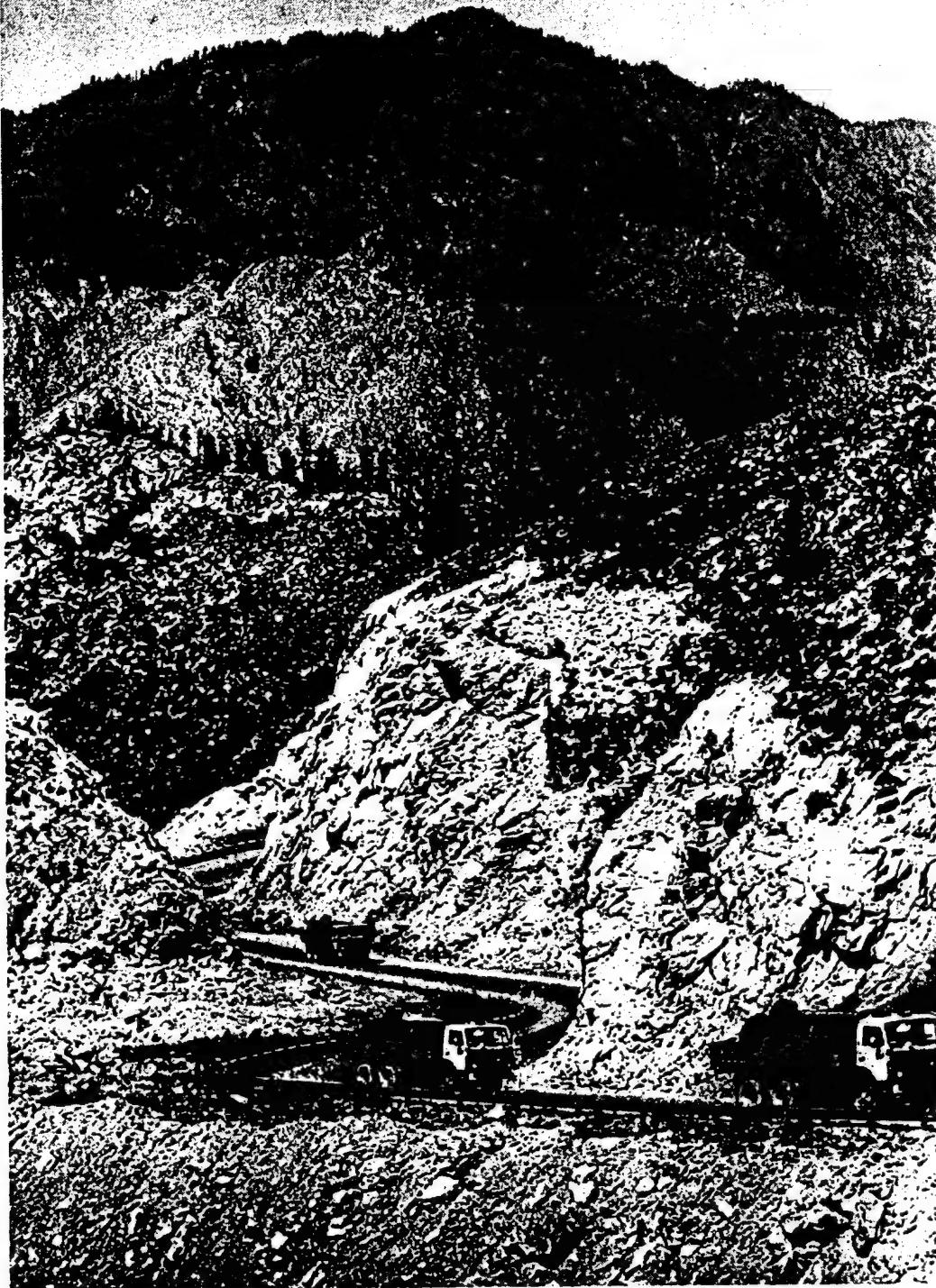
The Soviet's bad news had a lot to do with freedom of maneuver. In Afghanistan, the Soviet high OPTEMPO translated into single-file columns and convoys plodding through rugged mountain terrain against an unseen enemy (see Figure 1, page 8). This complete loss of surprise, maneuverability, minimal mobility

¹⁸ Lester W. Grau and Mohammad Yahya, Nawroz, "The Soviet Experience in Afghanistan," Military Review, September-October 1995, 25.

¹⁹ Scott R. McMichael, Stumbling Bear: Soviet Military Performance in Afghanistan, 21.

²⁰ Stephen J. Blank, "After Afghanistan: Reassessing Soviet Capabilities and Policies for Power Projection," Comparative Strategy, Volume 2, 1990, 121.

The Soviet Critical Vulnerability



Soviet army tanker trucks transport fuel to the Kabul garrison.

Source: Lev Dvoretzky and Oleg Sarin, The Afghan Syndrome: The Soviet Union's Vietnam, (Novato, CA: Presidio, 1993) 87.

and high risk of exposure to concentrated fire from dominant, defensible and lethal firing positions is reminiscent of Admiral Oldendorf's "crossing the T" maneuver against Admiral Nishimura's Southern Force during the Battle for Leyte Gulf.²¹ Ambushes were inevitable. A military force entering this type of arena without operational sequels just didn't stand much of a chance. The Soviet mechanized force understandably lost thousands of lives, vehicles and armored equipment for these very reasons.²²

The bad news for the Soviet army was the Mujahedin's good news. They consistently chose the time and place to attack, utilized long range observation, concentration of force combined with a high degree of maneuver, and excellent defensive posturing among the rock formations. The Mujahedin would typically setup a convoy ambush, planned within a narrow, constricted passage, with excellent intelligence and time to observe the predictable, mechanized force. They forced the convoy to a halt using mines (likely plastic, which the Soviets couldn't readily detect), and picked off the trapped vehicles with relative ease. A case in point: a forty man Mujahedin force armed with three RPG-7 anti-tank guns massacred and destroyed an entire motorized battalion in Paktia Province in 1980.²³ Whenever the fighting reached a critical stage, the guerrillas quickly withdrew into the mountains (hence their Soviet moniker "dukhi", or ghosts)²⁴.

²¹ E.B. Potter, "The Battle for Leyte Gulf," Sea Power: A Naval History (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1960) 784.

²² Scott R. McMichael, Stumbling Bear: Soviet Military Performance in Afghanistan, 55-57.

²³ Diego Cordovez and Selig S. Harrison, Out of Afghanistan: The Inside Story of the Soviet Withdrawal (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 59.

²⁴ Scott E. McIntosh, "Leading With The Chin: Using Svechin to Analyze the Soviet Incursion into Afghanistan, 1979-1989," Journal of Slavic Military Studies, June 1995, 421

The Soviet Army's logistics tail extended deep into the space of Afghanistan, severely restricted to a few low speed, steep, target-rich roads. Afghanistan occupied a "central position"²⁵ and negated any maritime consideration for LOO's, which left airlift as the only option for Soviet logistic support. Consequently, the Afghan road network was the Soviet logistical lifeline and represented a critical weakness.²⁶ A battalion of their combat force was often assigned to protect convoys and rear supply areas, and even this level of defense proved insufficient to protect their supplies.²⁷ The Soviets paid a staggering price in losing the freedom of maneuver: two thirds of their combat strength conducted escort duties, fortifications, and static patrol.²⁸

The antithesis to the Soviet failure to gain freedom of maneuver was the Mujahedin's exploitation of the space of Afghanistan. Pakistan, declared a neutral during the War, served as a Mujahedin sanctuary from the Soviet forces as well as the major supplier of arms and materiel. Although the Soviets were successful in attriting the resistance supply channels through ambushes, air strikes, air-dropped mines, and insertion of Spetnaz forces, they were unable to stop the materiel flow into Afghanistan--too much border, rugged terrain and harsh climatic conditions.

The factor of space was only one of several considerations in Soviet operational strategy and doctrine culture shock. Their main military objective had always been destruction of the enemy's armed force. They now faced a new predicament: the need to first develop CONOPS conducive to the Afghanistan terrain and climate (space) in order to then achieve operational success.

²⁵ Milan Vego, 9.

²⁶ The Soviet's logistical network and their ability to sustain the force was a critical vulnerability.

²⁷ Stephen J. Blank, Operational and Strategic Lessons of the War in Afghanistan, 1979-90, 49.

²⁸ Ibid.

The Factor of Time

"The dukhi stay away from open conflict, but by repeatedly ambushing us they interfere with our ability - and the ability of the Afghan forces - to maneuver quickly. In this way they often gain time to move their main forces, weapons, and ammunition out of the danger zone...In short, they are cunning rogues."

A frustrated Soviet Lieutenant's comment in 1987²⁹

The Soviet initial success in invading Kabul in 1979 demonstrated precisely the advantage of time in operational art. They relied on extensive intelligence, military infiltration, broadcasts of disinformation, and deception to launch a successful invasion with overwhelming surprise and quick, decisive maneuver. Soviet military leadership demonstrated the synergistic impact of coordinated air and mechanized ground forces against the disorganized Amin regime, achieving the defined objective through proper and timely execution. However, as the resistance forces coalesced and initiated hostilities against the pro-Soviet Afghan forces, the Soviets reverted to their traditional OPTEMPO, a conventional concentration of mass and firepower with little regard for their enemy or the impact of Afghanistan space.

The Soviets lost the time factor through their inability to: (1) seize and hold the initiative; (2) disrupt the enemy's "observe, orient, decide, and act (OODA) cycle;" and (3) create the element of surprise, the very advantages they initially enjoyed. They veered from their initial employment of operational art toward a "search out and destroy" operational loser employed by US forces in Vietnam, literally broadcasting their tactics and movements with predictable results. Afghanistan's space constraints effectively neutralized these operations.

Soviet methodology passed the operational art baton to the Mujahedin, allowing them to plan, prepare and execute any number of attacks when and where they

²⁹ Scott E. McIntosh, "Leading With The Chin: Using Svechin to Analyze the Soviet Incursion into Afghanistan, 1979-1989," 428.

chose, with freedom of maneuver. Unable to conduct an effective land campaign, the Soviet military then expended valuable time to retrain their forces to cope with Afghanistan's terrain, climate and an unorthodox enemy. A significant array of Soviet equipment, both mechanized and personal, also proved unsuitable for the Afghanistan terrain and climatic conditions, again requiring time to retrofit and redeploy.³⁰ Here then was a case of Soviet leadership allowing the combination of space and time to shape their decisions,³¹ i.e., a protracted war, in the most deleterious manner. They clearly had not planned for this sequel to their campaign.

Conversely, lengthening the war evolved into a huge ally to the Mujahedin. They leveraged the time factor and disrupted Soviet C³. They combined mobility and freedom of action to effectively concentrate smaller forces against the lumbering Soviet military machine, exercising what several Mujahedin commanders called "cookbook" warfare.³² The Mujahedin were acutely aware of the impact a protracted war would have within the Soviet Union. Realizing they were incapable of defeating the Soviet 40th Army, the rebels relied heavily on the factor of time to unravel Soviet political support, public will and troop morale. They knew their target.

The likelihood of a protracted war also played heavily on the Soviet military command and their forces. When the Soviets shifted from an offensive warfare campaign to a "stronghold strategy,"^{33,34} their control of time continued to erode and exposed the Soviet populace to the true nature of the war. The Soviet public began to witness the steady flow of bodybags from a conflict that was both confusing and

³⁰ Stephen J. Blank, "After Afghanistan: Reassessing Soviet Capabilities and Policies for Power Projection," 120.

³¹ Milan Vego, 26.

³² Scott R. McMichael, Stumbling Bear: Soviet Military Performance in Afghanistan, 17.

³³ Scott R. McMichael, "Soviet Tactical Performance and Adaptation in Afghanistan," 79.

³⁴ Concentrated forces to protect major cities, airfields and key facilities, LOC's and LOO's; and established defensive outposts to exert forward presence

concealed. Specifically, by late 1983, nearly four years after the initial invasion, the Soviet press incredulously reported that their forces had sustained a total of six casualties, whereas the actual totals were 6,262 fatalities and 9,880 wounded.³⁵ The Soviet mismanagement of time played directly into the rebel hands, and in spite of improved tactics and eventual success in weapon systems employment, the military was just too late in gaining the initiative. By 1986, the Soviet political leadership could no longer endure or fund a protracted war and the withdrawal process started.

The Factor of Forces

“Ahmed Shah’s forces put up a fierce struggle, fighting with a level of fanaticism never previously encountered by our forces.”

Soviet Lieutenant General Tep-Grigoriants, 1982³⁶

The Soviet commanders never balanced their forces to effectively operate in the space of Afghanistan. They never deployed a proper force-to-space ratio to achieve either a quick, decisive victory or force a negotiated settlement. Although the original intent was to rebuild the DRA, the Soviet Army gradually locked itself into the role as primary combatant,³⁷ an excellent example of “mission creep.”

The initial Soviet invasion force featured operational functions of C², intelligence, maneuver, OPSEC, and deception to gain control of Kabul, the major airfields, major roadway intersections, ammunition depots, and communications facilities with overwhelming success.³⁸ Advance forces infiltrated several areas of Afghanistan utilizing extensive disinformation, while airborne, ground and air elements demonstrated timely synchronization in the seizure of independent tactical objectives with complete surprise. Despite considerable resistance from elements of

³⁵ Lester W. Grau and Mohammad Yahya, Nawroz, 21.

³⁶ Diego Cordovez and Selig S. Harrison, 71.

³⁷ Mark Galeotti, Afghanistan: The Soviet Union’s Last War, 13-15.

³⁸ Ibid, 15-16.

the DRA Army, the Soviets gained control of the major cities and key facilities by the end of January 1980.³⁹ That was the Soviet high point of the war.

While the Soviet military accomplished a tactical and possibly operational victory against a yet unknown Afghan rebel force, on a grander scale they aroused the same outrage, resentment and passion from the Afghan populace as had every other infidel. The Soviet commanders neglected to get to know their enemy. What the Soviets viewed as a local war with limited objectives, the Afghan rebels fought a holy war with their very survival at stake.

Soviet ground forces eventually reached approximately 120,000 troops during the war, including ground troops, motorized rifle divisions and brigades, airborne regiments, air assault/airmobile brigades, and special operations (Spetnaz) forces, all part of the Soviet 40th Army.⁴⁰ The Soviet force structure centered around three operational tenets: a stronghold type of defense around major cities and facilities; secure and maintain lines of operations (LOO's) and lines of communications (LOC's); and conduct search and destroy operations against the rebel forces.⁴¹

At this point one might ask: "So what and where was the enemy's COG?" I don't believe the Soviet military knew the answer. The Mujahedin were the COG; but it was hard to buy off on this unconventional group of bickering rebel bands with no central leader as a target for 120,000 troops and the world's second largest military. They showed themselves only when they chose, enjoyed overwhelming popular support, and gradually developed into an effective force with some impressive arms

³⁹ Mark Urban, War in Afghanistan, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990), 42-44.

⁴⁰ Stephen J. Blank, "Airmobile Troops and Soviet Airland War: From Afghanistan to the Future," The Journal of Soviet Military Studies, March 1992, 30-32.

⁴¹ Scott R. McMichael, "Soviet Tactical Performance and Adaptation in Afghanistan", 79.

suppliers. Without defining and addressing these and other issues, the Soviet forces were on a course to defeat.

Soviet officers lacked what Col Arjun Ray called “mental mobility”, a failure to embrace mental flexibility, creativity, insight, and lateral and vertical thinking.^{42,43} Air and ground forces lacked synchronization against specific targets, and combined with remarkable tactical rigidity, the Soviet forces were unable to effectively cope with the terrain and climate. Their operational fires often proved ineffective, primarily a result of Mujahedin surprise, mobility, dispersal of forces, and an extraordinary use of “home field” terrain.⁴⁴ In summary, the Soviet OPTEMPO lacked unity of effort and initiative among its leadership and an operational strategy to successfully engage the space and forces of Afghanistan.

Sometime in 1982, the light went on inside the Soviet think tank and the military acknowledged that the rebel force resembled a light infantry force structure. An improved airborne offensive crept into the Soviet force structure. Specifically, the transition from ground movement to vertical envelopment, through helicopter transport and air assault operations, finally led to surprise attacks against the Mujahedin positions with increased mobility and freedom of maneuver.⁴⁵

Still, the space of Afghanistan remained the primary and persistent obstacle to Soviet forces, defined by five major factors. First, the Soviet forces could not control or isolate the battlefield over a long term basis, as they lacked an operational strategy and matching force structure in the theater. compounded by the logistical

⁴² Arjun Ray, “The Experiences of a BMP Battalion Commander-Reform, and the Way Ahead for Armoured Infantry,” RUSI Journal, Autumn 1989, 35.

⁴³ In the operational art arena, operational leadership defines these traits and reinforces the priority of leadership in determining purpose and aims to achieve operational objectives (see Milan Vego, U.S. Naval War College Operations Department NWC 4107, September 1996.)

⁴⁴ Lev Dvoretsky and Oleg Sarin, 96-101.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 109-110.

constraint to support additional forces. Consequently, the Mujahedin never lost their freedom of maneuver and maintained access to their sanctuary in Pakistan, i.e., the freedom to retreat and reconstitute their forces throughout the war.

Second, the steep mountainous terrain combined with desert conditions tended to compartmentalize the Soviet military elements, restricting communications and disrupting C², which led to isolated maneuvers tailor-made for rebel attack.

Third, Soviet forces were unfamiliar with and unprepared to fight in terrain averaging over 6,000' elevation. These elevations and conditions took a huge toll in personnel and equipment fatigue. Hepatitis, typhus, malaria, dysentery, and meningitis claimed between 25-33% of unit strength,⁴⁶ while 75-85% of Soviet helicopter losses were attributed to accidents or inferior maintenance,⁴⁷ and gasoline consumption was 70-90% greater than similar use in western Europe.⁴⁸

Fourth, even though their operational branches improved through airborne and air assault, the Soviets continued to rely on technological superiority--artillery, missile^{49,50} and rocket attack, employment of the helicopter, air strikes, and mechanized armor--*supported by the ground force*, to attack the enemy. They failed to turn this strategy around, i.e., to fight the Mujahedin light infantry force with a matching force *supported by technology*.

Fifth, the critical logistical tail siphoned an inordinate amount of combat troops from offensive operations to convoy escort and related sentry duties, further diluting

⁴⁶ Frunze Military Academy, 155.

⁴⁷ Aaron A. Danis, "Afghanistan Revisited: Soviet Lessons Learned," Military Intelligence, October-December 1990, 33.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 32.

⁴⁹ Joseph S. Bermudez, "Ballistic Missiles in the Third World - Afghanistan 1979-1992," Jane's Intelligence Review, February 1992, 51.

⁵⁰ The Soviets launched 1228 Scud missiles against the Mujahedin between October 1988 and December 1989, the first Scud employment in a counterinsurgency action, with little operational impact.

an already undersized and unprepared invasion force. These factors resulted in overall poor Soviet military performance, more a condition of doctrinal rigidity among Soviet commanders to take innovative and aggressive action against an enemy and terrain that dictated exactly those actions.

Soviet Alternative Actions

Two primary alternatives to the Soviet military operation could be considered in search of a more successful end state. One Soviet course of action (COA) could have incorporated a local war, similar in military force structure, however, with vastly different objectives. Instead of employing a military aimed at destruction of the land and displacement of the populace, the military objective could have emphasized protection and support of the populace.

The ability to “win the hearts and minds of the people” was successful for the French during the Indochina War (1951-1953) in the central regions of Vietnam;⁵¹ the US Marine Corps Combined Action Platoons (CAP’s) and GOLDEN FLEECE programs in Vietnam;⁵² and the British during the “Malayan Emergency.”⁵³ In these actions, the superior force identified sources of discontent among the populace and defined the force structure (means) and operational principles (ways) to alleviate or mitigate the issues (ends). The nature of these wars also witnessed the superior force adapting to the insurgents operational fires, something along the line of fighting fire with fire. The counterinsurgent will likely minimize damage to the local environment, keep both civilian and military casualties low (countering the insurgents focus), and maximize their credibility in the hearts and minds arena.

⁵¹ William J. Duiker, The Communist Road to Power in Vietnam, (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1981), 237

⁵² Eric M. Bergerund, The Dynamics of Defeat, (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1981), 35

⁵³ Larry E. Cable, Conflicts of Myths, (New York: New York University Press, 1986), 72.

The Soviet Union had not considered its own painful lessons of repression and animosity toward invaders. The puppet government they installed in Afghanistan instituted religious and social reforms that proceeded to alienate a vast majority of the population. Rather than reconcile the growing resistance through political and diplomatic means, the Soviet “Goliath” defaulted to their ‘knee-jerk’ response of massive force to achieve their ends. They found themselves on the other end of a guerrilla-style conflict and chose to ignore the systemic failures of the oppressors.

A second Soviet COA could have employed overwhelming force against the Mujahedin with little regard for operational art. They could have expanded their OPTEMPO with a force structure commensurate with US troop strength in Vietnam (an approximate increase of 350,000 over their Afghanistan total). Their primary operational objective--annihilation of the rebel forces combined with devastation of the land and the rural populace--would not have changed. The Soviet military possessed the weapon systems, force structure and a heritage of large scale engagement to conduct such a campaign. They also would have lost.

As stated earlier, the Soviet logistics tail simply could not support a larger invasion force than the actual total.⁵⁴ Afghanistan’s underdeveloped roadway network was the sole overland transportation system (a railway system was nearly non-existent),⁵⁵ and would likely have continued to suffer from rebel ambushes and land mines. Support airlift would still be limited by overland delivery from the airfield to the troops, and Soviet air operations would have continued to suffer from Mujahedin attack by US-supplied Stinger missiles,⁵⁶ a force multiplier that

⁵⁴ Lester W. Grau and Mohammad Yahya, Nawroz, 23.

⁵⁵ Scott R. McMichael, Stumbling Bear: Soviet Military Performance in Afghanistan, 21.

⁵⁶ Lester W. Grau and Mohammad Yahya, Nawroz, 22.

maintained the Mujahedin tilt on the playing field. The Soviet military would have to conduct all operations in a hostile and barren environment, terribly unsuited to their force structure. They could not have sustained the expanded OPTEMPO as evidenced by their actual performance.

Summary

The Soviet Union entered Afghanistan with a remarkable lack of knowledge about their opponent and the theater of operations. Here was a military force--highly-versed in training, leadership and management of operational art--about to engage in a style of warfare they were extremely unprepared for. Although the Soviet Army never lost a major engagement in Afghanistan, they failed to adapt and adjust to the space and forces encountered. The Soviet commanders mismanaged the space-to-force ratio and failed to exploit their greatest advantage, a quick and decisive offensive operation designed to gain and maintain the initiative. In doing so, the factor of time became their enemy and the Mujahedin's strongest ally.

The Afghanistan War was one more example of a superior power's inability to grasp the critical relationship between space and time. The Soviets failed to identify and effectively plan either direct or indirect routes of attack against the enemy's COG, which led directly to a protracted engagement. Perhaps defining the enemy's COG was too difficult at the time, a position I believe was not without merit. History offers a litany of counterinsurgency conflicts revealing superior military forces that failed to identify and define military ends, ways and means to defeat an enemy, and the Afghanistan War is clearly no exception. This does not have to be the rule.

Several operational takeaways from this war--by no means are they leading-edge thinking--are presented herein. First, the notion that the offensive force must

engage with a ratio three to five times greater than the defender seems to fit right in the classic paradigm box. Surprise was the most successful operational principle in eight years of mountain warfare, and can only be achieved by freedom of action. Bigger was not better. Second, the adversary must be identified, including their strengths and weaknesses, and aligned with the space of the conflict. Only then can the opponent begin to define and apply the resources, using operational art, to achieve strategic goals. In this war, the misalignment between Soviet identifying their enemy, understanding of space and application of forces was painfully obvious. Third, the factor of time can easily tip the scale between winning and losing. Much like a game clock in sports, all the players must know the impact of time on both their own and the adversary's strategy. The winner will understand the priceless value of time.

The Soviet Union had years of direct involvement with Afghanistan, both military and political, to assess the nature of Afghanistan space, culture and aims. They had every opportunity to plan the proper military condition to achieve their aims, develop resources (means) to apply their military force with courses of action (COA's), and time to assess risk vs rewards. Soviet paradigms proved too strong, leadership too inflexible, and they faced an enemy that refused to lose. Finally, I conclude that one element--the space of Afghanistan--and the Soviet Union's failure to develop an effective force structure to operate within this space, proved to be the major factor leading to David's strength and Goliath's fall.

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